

Why A Rational Approach to Ethics?

A Review of *Ethical Issues in Behavior Modification*¹

by S. B. Stolz and Associates²

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In 1974, the American Psychological Association appointed a commission to produce a report which would examine and clarify the ethical and legal issues surrounding the practice of behavior modification. The appointment of this commission followed a Law Enforcement Assistance Administration proclamation banning the further use of anti-crime funds for behavior modification programs in prisons. Since the LEAA criticisms leveled at behavior modification could just as easily have been leveled against any other psychological intervention by any other governmental agency, it was clearly in the self-interest of the APA to produce a report which would minimize the aversive monetary loss looming in the not too distant future should governmental funding of psychological interventions terminate. *Ethical Issues in Behavior Modification* is the commission's report, providing an overview of the current, ethical issues which have been publicly raised in connection with the field of behavior modification.

Overview of the Book

The organization of the book is straightforward. After an initial foreword by Albert Bandura praising the commission's work followed by a preface describ-

ing the professional attainments of commission members, the book opens with a brief description of behavior modification in an attempt to identify the variables characterizing behavior modification interventions (a difficult endeavor since behavior modification is scientifically based and thus, subject to revision). Included in the opening chapter is a discussion of the cultural, philosophical, and immediate historical issues which prompted this book.

Chapter two explicates in detail the basic ethical questions the commission elected to consider. Stolz and Associates first define ethical dilemmas as conflicts arising "... when the professional and the individual whose behavior is to be changed are from different social classes or have different status (and hence have different values or differential access to reinforcers), when the voluntary nature of the involvement of the persons whose behavior is to be changed is compromised in any way, when their competence to enter into an agreement regarding the intervention is questionable, or when people are subjected to interventions they do not realize are in effect" (p. 18). Based on this definition the commission then identifies eight ethical issues which could result in ethical dilemmas. Unfortunately, a thorough behavioral analysis providing a rationale for the selection of these issues is never presented. The eight issues identified include:

- 1) *Identification of the client* (distinguishing between the two meanings of the term client: the person whose behavior is to be modified and the person who is paying the psychologist).
- 2) *Definition of the problem and selection of goals* (emphasizing explicit identification of professional as well as client contingencies).

¹Stolz, S. B. and Associates, *Ethical Issues in Behavior Modification*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1978.

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3) *Selection of the intervention method* (discussing the implication of "least restrictive alternatives").

4) *Accountability* (stressing the import of regular and reliable measurement as prerequisites of quality assurance).

5) *Evaluation of the quality of the psychologist* (competency) *and the intervention* (emphasizing explicit programming of maintenance and generalization, as well as follow-up).

6) *Record keeping and confidentiality* (stating that APA ethical guidelines are just as appropriate in this regard for behavior modifiers as for any other psychologist).

7) *Protection of the client's rights* (describing the three aspects of informed consent: knowledge, voluntariness, and competence).

8) *Assessment of the place of research in therapeutic settings* (discussing the necessity of systematic replication as essential to demonstrating treatment efficacy).

A great portion of the commission's actual work, (and, thus, the focus of the report) was directed at identifying ethical concerns in the major settings where the techniques of behavior modification are applied. Central to this identification process were the concepts of differential control and countercontrol. To some extent, differing degrees of control and countercontrol present in each setting necessitated the emphasis on different sets of ethical concerns. The settings and ethical issues identified and discussed by the commission were: 1) *Outpatient settings* (with special ethical concerns regarding identification of the client, definition of the problem, and selection of goals, and accountability); 2) *Institutional settings* (with special ethical concerns regarding identification of the client, definition of the problem and selection of goals, selection of the intervention method, and protection of the client's rights); 3) *School settings* (with special ethical concerns regarding identification of the client, definition of the problem and selection of goals, selection of the intervention method, accountability, and protection of the client's rights); 4) *Prison settings* (with special ethical concerns regarding definition of the problem and selection of goals, protection of the prisoner's rights, and problems in implementation); and 5) *Society* (with special ethical concerns regarding identification of the client, and

protection of the client's rights).

The remainder of the book includes the commission's concluding recommendations which stress the adoption of a detailed checklist of issues and questions that should be applied to any psychological intervention, a reprint of the APA's "Ethical Standards for Psychologists: 1977 Revision," a reprint of the APA's "Standards for Providers of Psychological Services," and an excellent annotated bibliography of references covering the ethical and legal issues related to psychological interventions.

Issues: A Radical Behavioral Perspective

The stated mission of the book was to ". . . focus on the area of applied behavior analysis in research and practice in order to recommend effective courses of action to deal with the legal, ethical, and professional issues raised by these behavior-influencing procedures" (p. xiv). From a radical behavior perspective the book failed to accomplish its mission.

Since the focus of this review hinges on the distinction between methodological and radical behaviorism, describing the differences between these approaches is critical. Methodological behaviorism can be described in terms of its methods, as derived from a form of logical positivism. "From this perspective, the scientist can deal only with public and not with private events, only with objective and not with subjective variables, only with facts and not with values." (Krapfl & Vargas, 1977, p. x). In contrast, radical behaviorism accepts private events as legitimate subject matter (following natural laws) for scientific study. As a philosophy of science, radical behaviorism deals with the behavior of the scientist as an integral part of science, thus including values, not only facts, within the scope of an experimental analysis. ". . . A radical behaviorist is principally an orthodox Skinnerian, that is, one whose analyses of psychological and cultural phenomena are

derived from the writings of B. F. Skinner.” (Wood, 1979, p. 9).

To avoid implying an increasingly untenable distinction between behavior modification and other behavior change efforts by psychologists, “behavior modification,” as used in this review, will refer to “. . . procedures that are based on the explicit and systematic application of principles and technology derived from research in experimental psychology, procedures that involve some change in the social or environmental context of a person’s behavior. The use of the term specifically excludes psychosurgery, electroconvulsive therapy, and the administration of drugs independent of any specific behavior of the person receiving the medication” (Brown et al., 1975, p. 3).

Domain of the Science

It seems significant at this point to explicitly identify the influence that Albert Bandura, then president of the APA, had in the development of the commission document. Bandura’s view of behavior modification stems from his unique “social learning” model, and, as such, is distinctly non-radical. Bandura appointed a commission on which radical behaviorists were minimally represented. Simply stated, Bandura’s power of appointment left radical behaviorists with no effective counter-control over the commission.

The effect of limiting a document on the ethics of behavior modification to a commission weighted with non-radical behaviorists was to restrict the direction a study of ethics would take. The commission’s report reflects the perspective of methodological behaviorism. Radical behaviorists differ from methodological behaviorists on an important dimension: while the former view the behavioral analysis of ethics simply as neutral behaviors (verbal statements on ethics as well as ethical practices) that can be analyzed utilizing principles of reinforcement, stimulus control, etc., the latter

view ethics as independent of scientific analysis. Methodological behaviorists view their ethical behavior as beyond the domain of science, while radical behaviorists apply the scientific method to controlling their own ethical behaviors as well as that of others (Skinner, 1974).

Stolz and associates take a non-radical approach toward ethical issues, promoting a continuation of the rational approach to ethics. The commission’s humanitarian reasons for ethical practices provide a congenial atmosphere for the mentalist and take the task of defining the place of behavior modification out of the hands of behavior modifiers and out of the domain of science. The statement by Stolz and associates that “. . . in practice there is no way to determine what the long-term good of society is or what impact any immediate decision will have in the long run” (p. 22), implies that ethics are independent of a technology of values and, thus outside the scope of scientific analysis. Little justification is given for why an analysis of ethical behavior should remain outside the realm of science. Concern with the short-term welfare of humanity is not sufficient justification to make non-scientific ethical guidelines or to claim priority in identifying the important ethical issues.

Behaviorists or Psychologists

“The commission’s analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of having guidelines for the practice of behavior modification resulted in our not recommending the adoption of prescriptive and proscriptive guidelines. Rather, we recommend 1) That persons engaged in any type of psychological intervention subscribe to and follow the ethics codes and standards of their professions . . .” (p. 22).

Stolz and associates came to the above conclusion (no analysis of how this conclusion came about is presented) despite the fact that radical behaviorists have a unique view of ethics (perhaps incompatible with the commission’s conclusion). The issue is whether or not there is something sufficiently unique about behavior modification to warrant a set of

values distinct from those of the other psychologies.

Radical behaviorism is not merely a philosophy of psychology; it is a philosophy of science. To the radical behaviorist, all ethical issues are simply instances of behavior with the same variables accounting for both scientific discovery and social applications of those discoveries. This view of ethics is rooted in conceptual imperialism (Krantz, 1971): Radical behaviorism is all encompassing, it is not encompassed by other philosophies, and thus it requires an ethical framework independent of other psychologies. As radical behaviorists, we must bring the public to understand the terminology of control so that we can use the terms explicitly in the interests of the long-range survival of the culture. Society must be educated, not reinforced for mentalistic notions.

The effect of including behavior modification within the framework of normative ethical guidelines will be to constrain the further development of a science of behavior. An alternative to this dilemma is to develop a technology of values, determine which behaviors to select, and then to work toward rearranging societal contingencies in order to shape those behaviors. This technology of values and its implementation is what the field of behavior analysis needs, but unfortunately, the book by Stolz and associates does not provide it.

Individual Versus Cultural Values

"In the commission's analysis of these issues we stress protection for the rights of the recipient of the intervention . . . we chose to emphasize the client's rights, and that is the point of view throughout the rest of the report." (p. 15).

An analysis of values becomes especially important when discussing client's rights versus society's rights. According to Stolz and associates, the reason client's rights were emphasized as the proper focus of any intervention as opposed to emphasizing long-term values which would benefit the culture was the im-

possibility of determining values which would benefit society in the long run. (By some unknown logic, the commission assumed that values which would benefit the individual in the long run could be determined). This emphasis seems contrary to the impact that a thorough discussion of individual, group, and cultural values may have had on the entire book and can be criticized in two separate ways.

First, the assertion that values which benefit culture in the long run cannot be specified, runs counter to scientific practice in the fields of agriculture, chemistry, medicine, nuclear physics, biology and other sciences. Farmers plant crops in the spring for the long-range goal of harvesting them in the fall, an event which is predictable and controllable (as well as benefiting society in the long run). The very basis of science is to translate the superstitious complexities of nature into predictable and controllable future events. Ethical behavior is another of these events, equally predictable and controllable. Stolz and associates are subscribing to an untenable mentalism by maintaining that ethical behavior cannot be analyzed in terms of long-term cultural values.

Secondly, Skinner has argued that ethics and values are understandable by a science of behavior (ethical statements are simply examples of pointing out contingencies of reinforcement). Three general classes of values (or "reinforcers"), differing only in the circumstances determining their availability, are the key to an analysis of social ethics. Skinner's analysis of good and bad contingency statements (ethical statements), is governed by an interaction of three sets of values. According to Skinner (1953), these three sets of values are: 1) individual values, which consist of events or outcomes which are directly reinforcing (i.e., food and water); 2) social values, which consist of events or outcomes which are reinforcing to groups and thereby lead others to mediate reinforcement for an in-

dividual (i.e., conformity to rules); 3) cultural values, which reflect contributions to a culture's survivability, socially evolved through a natural selection-like process (i.e., scientific behavior itself). In terms of this analysis, ethical statements pointing out behavior as good or bad are means of mediating otherwise long-term contingencies by providing immediate reinforcement or punishment to produce culturally valued behavior.

An analysis of values on this level precludes the necessity for a bias toward either clients' or society's rights, since the two are simply examples of reinforcers applied in different situations. Ethical behavior results when events directly reinforcing to the individual are also reinforcing to the society in the long run. Thus, and perhaps contrary to the ethics espoused by Stolz and associates, it is unethical to reinforce behavior which is not conducive to the survival of the culture. It is the responsibility of behaviorists to arrange contingencies of reinforcement which improve social practices and promote society's effective use of control as a tool in order to develop the most culturally beneficial behaviors.

Contingencies of Reinforcement

Although Stolz and associates refer briefly to some of the contingencies controlling the behaviorist (such as the requirements of those who pay the behavior modifier and the requirements of those whose behavior is to be changed), the commission is content to recommend that behaviorists simply inform the clients of their allegiances and strive for greater concern for the client's rights, perhaps through the use of a checklist making the relevant issues more salient.

Stolz and associates imply that psychologists are capable of knowing what is governing their own behavior but those controlled by the behavior change procedures are not. While the contingencies controlling the scientist's behavior as he or she interacts with the client, should be analyzed, analysis of the contingencies

controlling one's *own* behavior is difficult for even the most objective behavior analyst. Stolz and associates also suggest that perhaps behaviorists would want to choose to work for civil libertarian organizations as opposed to taking positions in industry, business, and governmental agencies whose interests might not be those of the client. Suggestions such as these are further examples of the commission refusing to recommend ways to rearrange the contingencies controlling the scientist's behavior.

Providing a checklist for concerned behaviorists seems a good step, but the commission fails to point out the contingencies which will allow scientists to adopt the very behaviors recommended (if they were, in fact, those behaviors determined to be for the benefit of cultural survival). Thus, the checklist is an idle recommendation, functioning as a bureaucratic solution to what are in reality, behavioral problems.

It is difficult to say what audience the book is directed toward (i.e., other psychologists, the public, or students of applied behavior analysis). Perhaps political considerations focused the book in an attempt to fend off public scrutiny of behavior modifiers (and psychologists in general). A policy in print may have postponed some contemporary legal problems, but the product provides little help for the behavioral scientist in the long run.

The entire perspective of the commission mitigated against providing a behavioral analysis of ethics which would give the guidelines promised in the commission's own stated mission. This is not to imply that the book is not important. Since the book is a report of an APA commission, the perspectives taken will be important in the careers of all psychologists. The issues and perspectives advocated by Stolz and associates represent the current majority opinion in the field of psychology. They set a standard against which minority perspectives can be compared.

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